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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001451

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SA/INS (BRENNIG, SIM) SA/PD (SCENSNY, ROGERS);
SSA/PAS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

E.O. 12958:N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [OIIP](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Leading Tamil Announcer and Husband Murdered in
Daylight Hours Shortly Before Kadirgamar Assassination

REFTELS: A) Colombo 812; B)Colombo 832

1. (SBU) Summary: Following the high-profile April 29 murder of Tamil commentator Dharmaretnam Sivaram (Ref A) and several alleged death threats received by other prominent Tamil journalists (Ref B), a well-known Tamil radio and television personality and her husband -- a former member of the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), a rival group to the LTTE -- were murdered at lunch time on August 12, 2005, in the travel agency they owned in Colombo. While police continue to investigate, some local news media have blamed the LTTE for this double murder. Tamil newspapers and websites that support the Tamil Tigers have suggested their murders were linked to a financial dispute. End Summary.

2. (U) Senior announcer at Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) Mrs. Relangi Selvarajah (45) and her husband, Mr. Sinnadurai Selvarajah (48) were killed by unidentified gunmen on Friday, August 12, at around 12:45 P.M., several hours before Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was assassinated. The murders occurred in a travel agency the couple owned in Colombo, while all four employees were reportedly out of the office for lunch. Their murders occurred several months after the April 29 murder of pro-LTTE senior journalist D. Shivaram and reports of death threats against other Tamil journalists.

3. (SBU) The Tamil media published Mrs. Selvarajah's obituary as a celebrated drama and media personality, (she had received a best actress award for a 1978 Sri Lankan film), while also reporting the couple's connection to PLOTE in a matter of fact manner. One Tamil contact told Information Officer Mrs. Selvarajah's radio and television broadcasts, including "Idaya Veenai" ("Music to the Heart") and "Uthaya Dharasanam" ("Morning Vision") had been staunchly anti-LTTE and therefore he was not surprised she had been killed. He further stated both Mr. and Mrs. Selvarajah campaigned actively for the PLOTE cause despite ending official ties with the organization some fifteen years ago. The source went on to allege the couple had been involved in trafficking of Sri Lankan Tamils to Canada and other western countries.

4. (SBU) Many of Relangi Selvarajah's former colleagues concur with the allegation that the LTTE committed the double murder. According to a reliable veteran political commentator Relangi Selvarajah's radio programs were very anti-LTTE, and very pro-EPDP. (Note: The Eelam People's Democratic Party, led by LTTE-rival Douglas Devananda, holds one elected seat in Parliament. The LTTE alleges the Sri Lankan government supports an EPDP paramilitary and the LTTE is suspected of several attempts on Devananda's life amidst heavy government-provided security.) Her programs focused on development of the northern areas, purportedly part of EPDP MP Douglas Devananda's portfolio. A colleague of Mrs. Selvarajah at Rupavahini stated: "Relangi was openly criticizing the LTTE in her TV programs, and because of her roots in Jaffna," had knowledge with which she "helped the Sri Lanka Army with their logistical arrangements" in the North. The Rupavahini colleague said he believed she and her husband were killed by the LTTE. Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation reporter Lafir Mohammed, however, offered a different motive, asserting the murders were "due to a personal dispute regarding their travel agency."

5. (U) Most Sinhala newspapers ran headlines such as "TV broadcaster and husband shot dead," with the exception of Sinhala nationalist daily Divaina, sister paper to the English language Island, which portrayed the victims as a Tamil couple caught up in internal Tiger politics. Divaina bannered (8/13), "Tigers crash into Wellewatte business to kill Tamil couple," emphasizing an ethnic angle. Reporters Sans Frontieres released a statement on August 16 condemning the double murder.

6. (SBU) With approximately fifty percent of the island's audience, the state-owned broadcast media conglomerate,

including Rupavahini (SLRC) television and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's (SLBC), has a larger television and radio audience than do independent stations, with many regional broadcast centers. Like other state-run media organizations, SLRC and SLBC generally function as the government's mouthpiece. Although government and state-run media sometimes publish the statements of rival Tamil groups such as the EPDP and TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front), the independent Tamil media do not openly criticize the LTTE nor take positions regarding other political parties. Nevertheless, some Tamil observers claim that recent Tamil language programs on state-owned TV took a distinctly anti-LTTE, pro-EPDP stand.

17. (SBU) Comment: As a broadcaster for the state-owned media, Relangi Selvarajah did not practice the self-censorship evident in independent Tamil journalists' reporting on the LTTE and Tamil politics. Combined with her husband's PLOTE connection, the couple's outspokenness against the LTTE likely provoked their double murder. The LTTE brooks little dissent from Tamil journalists considered traitors to the Tigers. The murder of another prominent Tamil journalist and her husband will only add to many Sri Lankan journalists' fears about the freedom they have to publish or broadcast their views. End Comment.

Entwistle